

1. A sketch map of the Mid-Atlantic region area, showing English and German settlement in the late 18th Century.

The American Flintlock Pistol and Its English Antecedents

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To understand the development of the American pistol, it is necessary to examine the culture and the socio-economics during the period of its development. Material objects do not suddenly spring into being, but are instead the result of many cultural influences on the craftsman who produces the object. The objects in question, in this case American flintlock pistols, came about because, first, someone wanted to buy them and had the money to pay for them, and second, a craftsman was there to make them. The customer and the craftsman (gunsmith) had a common understanding of what the object (pistol) should look like when it was finished. This usually means that the customer and craftsmen have a common cultural background and share the same cultural values.

The American flintlock pistol, like the long rifle, evolved primarily in the mid-Atlantic region of the country. Other areas of the country, such as New England, also produced their own distinctive pistols but, like New England rifles, they were not produced in quantities anywhere near as great as those produced in the mid-Atlantic region.

The mid-Atlantic region is defined as the region extending from the Philadelphia area, north toward New York, west to the Appalachian Mountains, and south to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. This area is shown in Figure 1, with its larger or more important urban centers. During the last quarter of the 18th Century, the German culture predominated in the broad areas of Pennsylvania, north and west of Philadelphia to the Appalachian Mountains, as well as down the valley of Virginia. In general, the remaining portion of the mid-Atlantic region was populated by people with English background and culture. Evidence from surviving American-made pistols of this region indicates they were made in small numbers, starting perhaps as early as 1770, but basically they were made during the last quarter of the 18th Century.

America, prior to the Revolutionary War, was a colonial enterprise of the mother country. In reality, America was an extension of England for most areas of the country and, in particular, the larger seaboard cities like Philadelphia. Our leading citizens were basically all of English descent and they thought of themselves as Englishmen in language, customs and dress.

Philadelphia in 1775 was the fastest growing and the wealthiest colonial city and probably the fourth largest English-speaking city after London, Edinburgh, and Dublin.

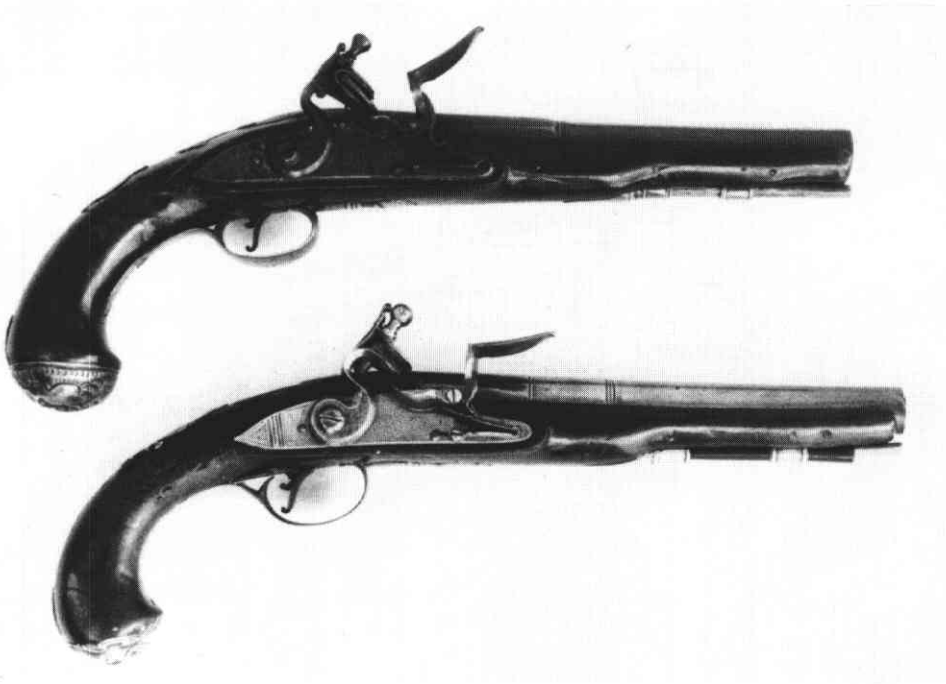


At this time, Philadelphia was the leading city in all phases of commerce. It was the busiest port, with the shipping of flour and lumber from the interior to the West Indies and to other colonial ports. This was a very lucrative trading business for the city because it required a large infrastructure to support it: everything from shipbuilding to flour milling was necessary. Prosperity was such that the city could support paved sidewalks, a public water supply and a charity hospital, as well as other public buildings. Philadelphia was so impressive that British Lord Adam Gordon called it “one of the Wonders of the World” when he visited the city in 1765.¹

The leading citizens of Philadelphia, such as John Penn (grandson of William Penn), Samuel Powell, John Cadwalader, and Charles Stedman, were all of English extraction. Most had been to England at least once and were thoroughly familiar with London fashions in all phases of the decorative arts. London style set the tone for architecture, painting, furniture and everything else, including weapons, to which a leading citizen of Philadelphia might aspire.

These same values, attitudes, and admiration of London work and London fashion were prevalent throughout other American colonial cities, such as Charleston, New York, and Boston.

In the mid-Atlantic region, Annapolis, Maryland, and Norfolk and Williamsburg, Virginia, were perhaps even more strongly English-oriented in their attitudes than Philadelphia. In fact, it is very difficult to visually separate some “American” from “English” furniture and silver during this period. A detailed examination of secondary



2. A Samuel Coutty pistol (upper) shown with a similar English pistol by I. Pratt.



3. A comparison of the shell carving of the S. Coutty pistol and a Ketland & Co. English pistol on the right.

woods, maker's technique and marks is necessary in order to establish whether it was made in England or America. Not only did London fashion set the standards, but the manner of production was the same in America as in London.

There was a large import trade from London to supply the latest fashion, but this trade was somewhat hampered by the deteriorating political situation between the two countries. In fact, there were several more or less successful non-importation acts starting in 1765, designed to prevent importation of goods from England.

American craftsmen, in order to compete with imported goods and to secure patronage, advertised themselves as lately from London, London trained, or things "made in the latest London fashion."² Gunsmiths advertised their London background when possible, or at least guns "in the latest London fashion."³

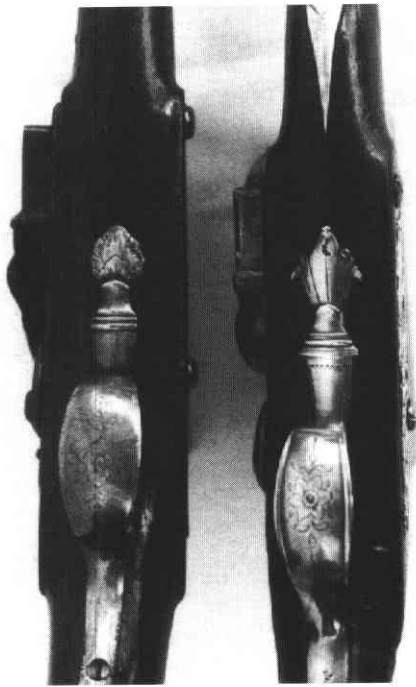
High style Philadelphia cabinetmakers such as John Elliott and Thomas Affleck were London-trained. Even wood carvers such as Courtenay and Renolds, who among others carved the great rococo furniture of Philadelphia, were immigrants from London in the 1760s.

In the production of Philadelphia high style objects such as furniture and silver, there were divisions of labor the same as in London. In the case of the great rococo furniture, the shop that produced the piece called upon specialized carvers to do the ornamental carving. There were craftsmen that specialized in doing only carving or, in the case of silver, chasing or fancy engraving, and existing craftsmen's bills show payment to such specialists for their service on a major commission. This was nothing more

than the traditional way of doing business, and the immigrant craftsmen, whether cabinetmaker, silversmith or gunsmith, continued doing business in the cities as they had in England or on the continent.

Pistols made at this time also represented London fashion. A pistol was basically a luxury item, as a rifle or fowling piece was far more practical for the average man. Probably all common or utilitarian pistols were imported, as well as most of the better grade pistols, as stated in gunsmith advertisements from the period. However, some few American-made and -marked pistols survive from this period.

One of these, by Samuel Coutty, is shown in Figure 2, with a similar English pistol by I. Pratt, circa 1770. Based on the overall style, the period when imported English pistols would not have been readily available, as well as Coutty advertisements, the pistol was probably made about 1780. A comparison of this Philadelphia pistol with an English pistol of the same style shows a time lag of about 10 years from the latest London fashion as exemplified by Mortimer or Manton. The main feature of a grotesque mask butt was basically out of fashion in London by 1780 on all except the finest presentation pieces. This style lag is typical not only of pistols but of furniture, silver, architecture, and fashion. The lag was due, in part, to distance from London, conservatism of colonial customers and the maker's knowledge of style when he or his workmen left England. Just the sheer time for a new item to be made in London, transported to America and to be seen by both customers and craftsmen was also a major factor in style lag.



4. The trigger guard finials of the two pistols with the S. Coutty pistol to the right.



5. The engraved stand of arms of the S. Coutty pistol (top) is shown in contrast to the cast stand of arms of the I. Pratt English pistol.



6. The repoussé silver mask of the S. Coutty pistol is shown with the more detailed cast silver mask of the I. Pratt pistol on the left.

On the pistol, the maker's name, Coutty, is engraved on the lockplate and the location, PHILAD^A, is engraved on the 8 inch, .58 caliber smooth bore brass barrel in the same manner as most of the English pistols were marked. The shell carving at the barrel tang is exactly the same as carving found on English pistols and shown in Figure 3 with an English pistol by KETLAND and Co. for comparison.

The engraved silver trigger guard is shown in Figure 4 with an English example by PRATT.

The sideplate's engraved stand of arms shown in Figure 5 corresponds to an English pistol's cast-in-relief stand of arms also shown in Figure 5. An engraved side plate was easier to produce than a cast one because of the effort required to make the mold for casting. This may have been particularly true if Coutty was only making a few pistols.

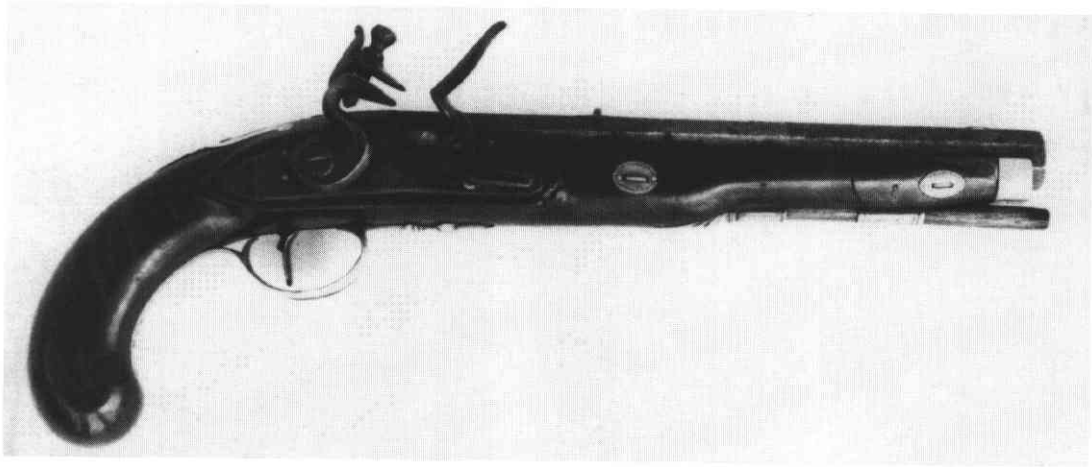
The grotesque mask butt cap shown in Figure 6 with a smaller English example, seems to be unique on this pistol, as the face was made by the repoussé process after raising the butt cap from a thin flat sheet of silver, rather than the usual process of casting the butt cap. English pistols have cast butt caps and published American silver mounted pistols with grotesque mask butt caps also appear to be cast because of the detail of the face evident in the photographs.

Who made the silver mountings? In the light of the 18th Century craft tradition, probably an unidentified Philadelphia silversmith. Particularly since the skill required to raise a design from flat silver to a rounded butt

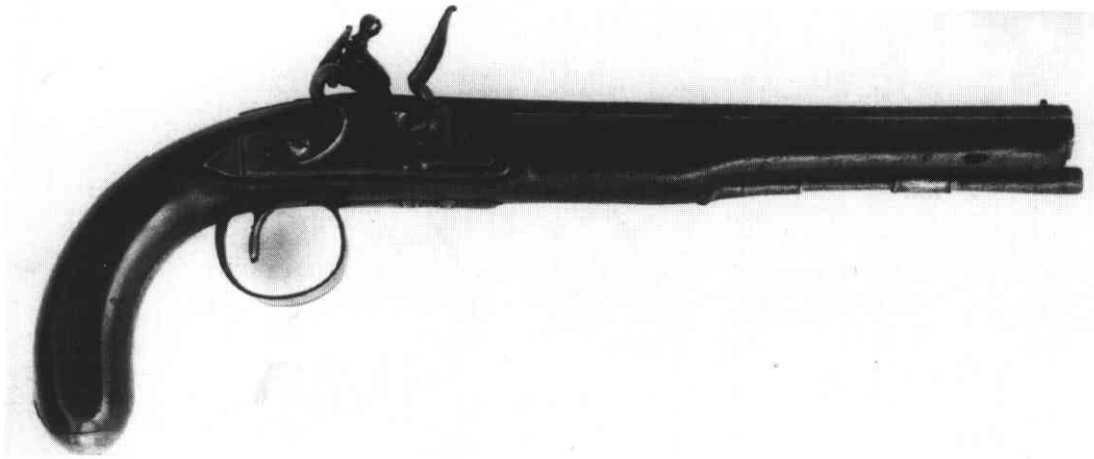
cap with a repoussé grotesque mask would not have been a normal gunsmithing skill. Unfortunately, there are no marks or other indications on the silver to indicate a maker. However, there are some other examples where there are marks to indicate the collaboration of a silversmith or an engraver to make or engrave the silver mountings.

The first example is the Resor pistol, shown in Figure 7, in the style of an English pistol of 1790. The silver trigger guard, Figure 8, shows the marks for the silversmith Charles Freeth, Birmingham, England, and the date letter for 1797/1798. Charles Freeth was by far the largest producer and exporter of silver furniture for guns in 18th Century England, producing almost all the silver gun furniture assayed at Birmingham from 1773 to 1807.⁵ Resor either purchased it from a merchant or imported the silver directly from England. At least one other Resor pistol with English silver is known.

A second example is the famous pair of Frederick Zorger pistols in Winterthur Museum. They are engraved on the lockplate F. Zorger & I.F., and YORKTOWN on the barrel. As Donald Fennimore points out, I.F. is probably John Fisher.⁷ John Fisher was a well-known clock maker, engraver and contemporary of Frederick Zorger in York, Pa. Fisher probably only engraved the pistols as he is not known as a silversmith. However, many clock makers also worked in silver, such as John Fessler of Frederick, Md. and John Lynch of Baltimore.⁸ Since the mounts were small and similar to the spandrels on a clock face, Fisher could well have cast the silver furniture. The addition of



7. Silver mounted pistol by Jacob Resor.



9. Iron mounted Philadelphia dueling pistol by Robert McCormick.



10. An unsigned silver mounted Virginia pistol shown with a larger silver mounted English officer's pistol by Ketland.

the initials of the engraver or silversmith to the maker's name on the lockplate was also a German tradition.⁹ This division of work is all in the English and European craft tradition: each man made the portion for which he was most skilled.

Note also that these pistols are marked similar to English pistols with the location, YORKTOWN, on the barrel and the maker's name on the lock.

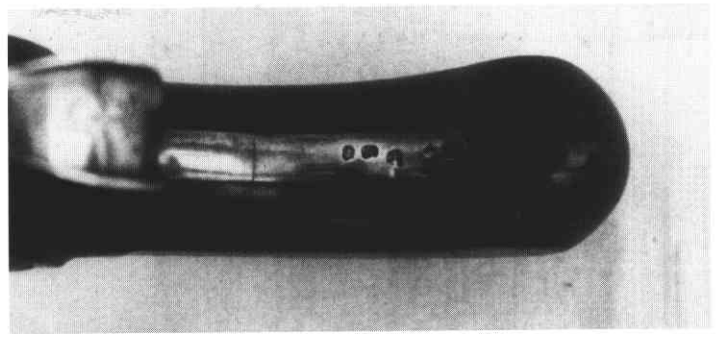
Later in date than the Coutty pistol is a single Philadelphia dueling pistol shown in Figure 9. The swamped iron octagon barrel is 10 inches long and .61 caliber. The barrel is fitted with both front and rear sights in the manner of the English dueling pistol. The top flat is engraved in script, "Globe Mills;" The name McCORMICK for Robert McCormick, the maker, is engraved in block letters on the lockplate. The trigger guard ends in the traditional acorn finial that was being replaced by the pineapple design on most London-made pistols by 1790. Globe Mills was located in northern Liberties Township at the northern edge of Philadelphia along the Delaware River.¹⁰

This lightweight dueling pistol resembles a typical dueler of 1780 as made by Robert Wogdon, both in overall shape and details. By the late 1790s, London dueling pistols were using much heavier barrels.¹¹

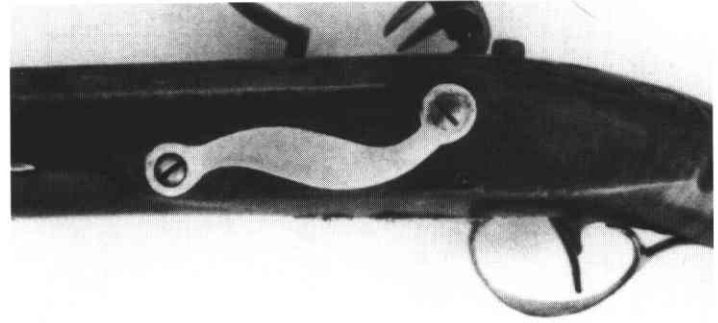
This illustrates the style lag, as McCormick's first recorded appearance in America is in 1798, when he was negotiating for musket contracts. This pistol was probably made just before he started in the musket business, as he failed to deliver on the musket contracts and was imprisoned for debt in 1801.¹²

The third early pistol is shown in Figure 10 with a similar but larger English officer's pistol. On stylistic grounds this pistol can be placed in the Fredericksburg area of Virginia and it probably dates from 1790-1800. This pistol again resembles the English pistol of 1780-1790 except for the figured maple stock and the military style side plate (Figure 11) on a silver mounted pistol. This side plate design could mean that it was made for an officer, but the 8 inch smooth bore octagon barrel, caliber .47, is a little small for an officer's pistol. The English pistol shown for comparison in Figure 10 has a barrel that is 10 inches long and musket bore of .78 caliber in order to use service ammunition. This Virginia pistol was in all probability made by an immigrant English gunsmith following the fashion he had learned in England. The English pistol shown for stylistic comparison is by Ketland & Co. with silver furniture by Charles Freeth hallmarked for 1787/1788.

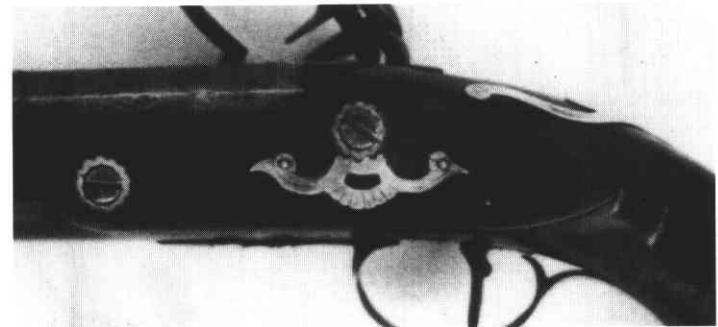
The three pistols illustrated and discussed are English in individual details and all three lack the nose cap of later American pistols. They show that quality pistols made in the mid-Atlantic urban areas in the late 18th Century were basically pistols made completely in the English pistol tradition.



8. English hallmarks on the trigger guard of the Resor pistol.



11. The military style sideplate of the Virginia pistol.



12. The unusual small side plate of the Jacob Resor pistol



13. Sketch of a Resor rifle side plate with the portion highlighted that was used for the pistol sideplate design.

The Jacob Resor pistol previously mentioned still resembles an English pistol more than an American or Kentucky pistol. "Jacob Resor" is engraved in script on a silver plate inlet in the top flat of the 9 inch, .45 caliber rifled barrel. The walnut stocked pistol has a small side plate, Figure 12, derived from the engraved design of his Kentucky rifles. A sketch of a Resor side plate is shown in Figure 13 with the similar portion outlined that was applied to the pistol. Pistol side plates were basically out



14. A. Schweitzer pistol signed AS on the lockplate.



15. Stylized silver flower finial of the A. Schweitzer pistol is related to the flower finial of the I. Pratt English pistol in Fig. 4.



16. Sideplate view of the A. Schweitzer pistol between an A. Schweitzer rifle (top) and a John Armstrong rifle (bottom).



17. Relief carved design at the rear of the A. Schweitzer barrel.

of style by 1790 in London. The use of the dated 1797/1798 English silver trigger guard and perhaps ramrod thimbles probably means the pistol was made while Resor lived in Mercersburg, Pa., as he apparently moved west in 1811.¹³

The next group of pistols are all from the 1st quarter of the 19th Century and were produced by men who were primarily Kentucky rifle makers living in the areas where the German culture predominated. They are quite interesting as they show the inland Kentucky rifle maker producing a pistol that is stylistically more closely related to Kentucky rifles than English pistols. However, throughout the peak of Kentucky pistol production, 1800-1830, many Kentucky pistols still show some surprising vestiges or influences from English pistol-making practice.

The following pistols by Abraham Schweitzer, Axariah Alloway and Henry Albright are all typical Kentucky pistols made between 1800 and 1820 in the south central region of Pennsylvania. They are the products of men whose primary gunmaking business was rifles or an occasional fowler.

The A. Schweitzer pistol shown in Figure 14 has a $9\frac{1}{2}$ inch octagon rifled barrel of .47 caliber. The furniture is brass except for the 4 silver escutcheons and the silver stylized flower used as a finial on the trigger guard (Figure 15) similar to the English one in Figure 4. The pistol is shown in Figure 16 with a John Armstrong rifle and an A. Schweitzer rifle to illustrate the miniature rifle concept with their identical side plates, curly maple stocks and brass hardware. It also illustrates the strong relationships between guns made within a 30 mile distance of each other. In this case, A. Schweitzer followed the English practice of maker's name (initials) on the lock plate, a finial on the trigger guard, and relief carving at the rear of the barrel (Figure 17). The relief carving around the barrel tang could also be a carryover from his rifle designs. Also, there is no place name on the barrel.



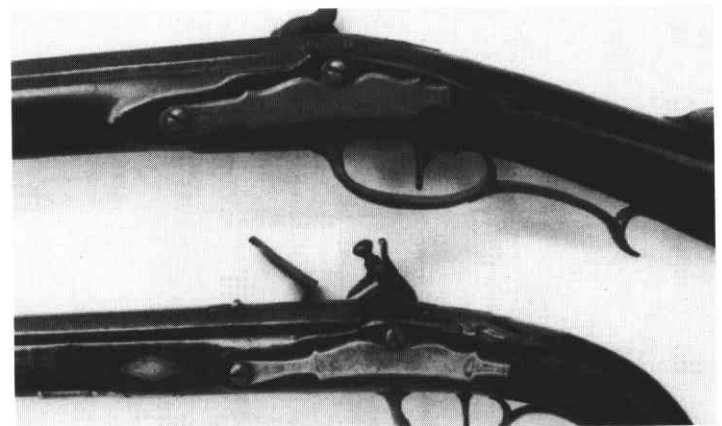
18. A. Alloway pistol (converted from flintlock).

The curly maple stocked Axariah Alloway pistol, Figure 18, has a 10 inch octagon rifled barrel of .48 caliber. The name Alloway is engraved in script on the top flat of the barrel and the lock is an imported English lock marked Ketland & Co. The brass side plate, Figure 19, is typical of York County rifles in the first quarter of the 19th Century. This pistol is even more interesting, with a checkered butt and an English style spur trigger guard used on some London pistols after 1795.¹⁴ This pistol also has the English fashion of a hooked breech. A hooked breech is relatively rare at this time in America, and was not common in America until the percussion era.



19. The A. Alloway pistol sideplate is typical of York County rifle sideplate design.

The Albright pistol, Figure 20, is basically a miniature Kentucky rifle and owes nothing to English pistol tradition. The stock is curly maple, the hardware is brass with a 9 1/2 inch iron octagon rifled barrel of .46 caliber, signed in script "H. Albright." The entire design of the pistol is closely related to Albright rifles, as shown by similar side plates on both the pistol and rifle in Figure 21.



21. Sideplate design of a H. Albright rifle and pistol.

In addition to rifle makers who made an occasional pistol, there were a few makers who, based on surviving specimens, produced a significant number of pistols in comparison to their rifle production during the first quarter of the 19th Century.



20. Henry Albright pistol.



22. Two Jacob Kuntz, Philadelphia, pistols.



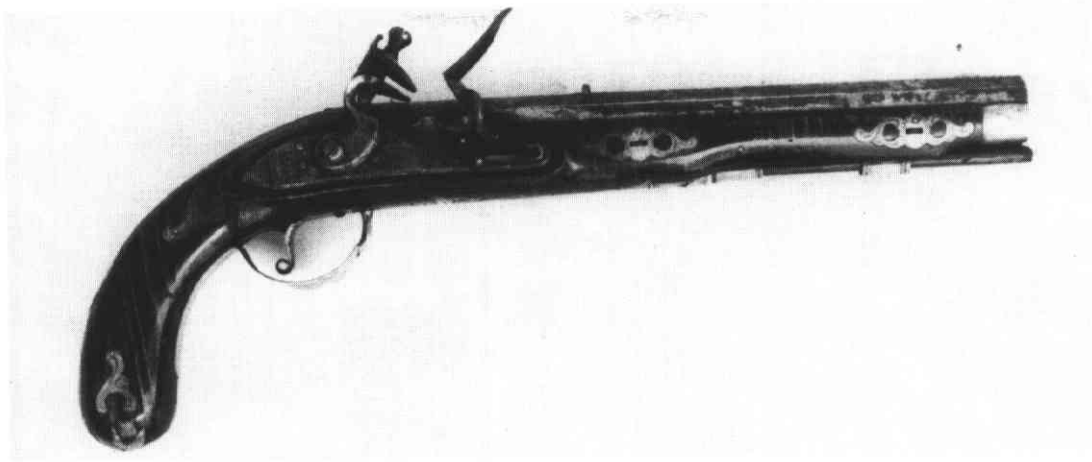
23. The trigger guard finials of the Kuntz pistols.



24. The sideplates of the two Kuntz pistols.

Jacob Kuntz of Philadelphia seems to have been one of the gunsmiths who produced a significant number of pistols. Two Jacob Kuntz pistols are illustrated in Figure 22. They show mostly Kentucky rifle features, probably because Jacob Kuntz had been a rifle maker in Allentown, Pa., before moving to Philadelphia in 1811.¹⁵ The upper pistol is stamped J. KUNTZ PHILADA on the iron, part round, part octagon smooth bore barrel of .45 caliber. The lock of this pistol is signed in script JK and stamped PHILADA. The barrel of the lower pistol is also .45 caliber and smooth bore. The lock on this pistol is stamped J. KUNTZ. Both pistols have engraved trigger guards with elaborate finials (Figure 23) and side plates (Figure 24). By now, the engraved side plates are an American feature, as they had been out of fashion in London since the 1780s. Both pistol grips are checkered after the London fashion at this time. Jacob Kuntz made sufficient pistols to influence other makers in Philadelphia to where a Philadelphia style of pistol existed. These two pistols exemplify the Kuntz or Philadelphia style pistol of the 1810-1830 period.

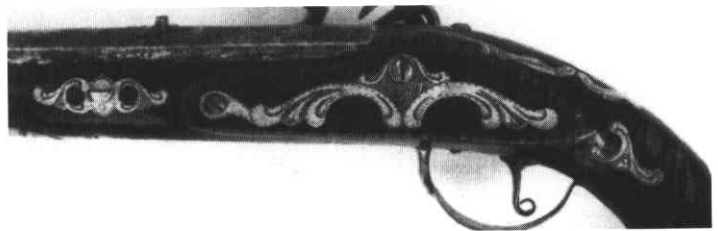
Farther West, in Uniontown, Pa., John Lechner produced silver mounted pistols, and one is shown in Figures 25, 26 and 27. A silver plate engraved J. LECHNER is inlaid on the top flat of the 9 inch octagon, smooth bore, iron barrel of .45 caliber. The lock on this pistol is unsigned, but appears to be identical to a lock signed in script J.L. on another Lechner pistol. This pistol probably dates from the 1820-1830 period and does not appear to have an English prototype or English features. Here the lavish use of silver mirrors the use of silver in rifles of western Pennsylvania.



25. Silver mounted pistol from Western Pennsylvania by John Lechner.

Unlike the earlier silver mounted example where a silversmith probably made the silver furniture, this furniture is all made from thin sheet silver. Mounting and engraving the sheet silver was certainly within the ability of Lechner. This is particularly true when one considers his relative isolation in Western Pennsylvania compared to a gunsmith living in Philadelphia who could have engaged a silversmith.

The unsigned pair of pistols, Figure 28, are examples of pistols made at the end of the flintlock era. They were made just north of Allentown, and can be attributed to one of the Hess family of gunmakers. The Hess family's work can be distinguished by their use of a Lancaster style side plate on Allentown-Bethlehem area guns.¹⁶ The part round, part octagon iron barrels are 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches long and smooth bore of .44 caliber. Two metal bands, one of brass and one



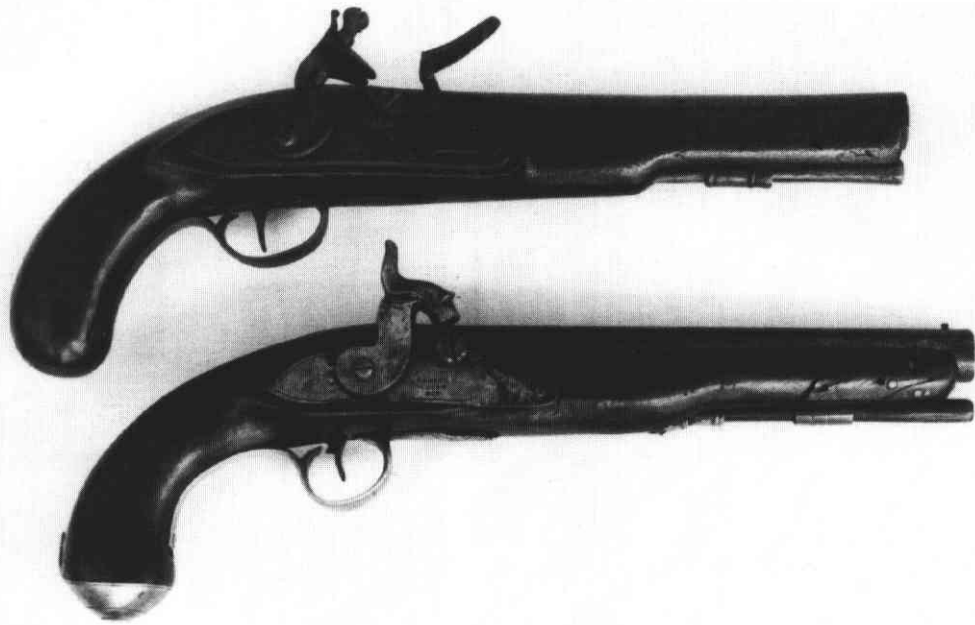
26. The elaborated design of the sideplate of the Lechner pistol.



27. Trigger guard of the Lechner pistol.



28. Pair of unsigned pistols attributed to the Hess family of gunsmiths.



30. Two imported pistols from the War of 1812 period.



29. View showing a stylized human face at head of the Hess pistol trigger guard.

of silver, encircle the breech of the barrel after the English fashion of the late 18th Century. The late English lock with its reinforced cock is one of the last forms of the flintlock and is signed H. Elwell. Henry Elwell was a gun and pistol maker in Birmingham, England, with working dates of 1838-1857. These pistols, like some other Allentown-Bethlehem school guns, have a human face ahead of the trigger guard, shown in Figure 29.

During the same time period as the pistols discussed, large numbers of plain, common, and low-cost pistols were imported for the American market from both England and Liege, Belgium. In fact, this trade in foreign-made guns was so large that American gunsmiths petitioned Congress in 1803 for protection against the importation of these cheap foreign guns.¹⁸ Their claim was the same, then as now, that cheap foreign made goods would force the Americans out of business. There were, in fact, various tariffs and duties on foreign goods, but these were insufficient to prevent the importation of large quantities of foreign weapons.¹⁹

Two of these foreign pistols are shown in Figure 30. The top pistol with the Germanic style lock, according to family history, was carried by an American Naval officer in the War of 1812. It has LONDON stamped on the 9 inch smooth bore caliber .69 brass barrel, with English proof marks, and there is no maker's name on the gun. The lower pistol in Figure 30 has been converted to percussion and appears to be English. The lock is marked DANIEL CROSS & CO., which is an unidentified name at this time. The 8¾ inch .70 caliber smooth bore iron barrel has English proof marks and is stamped with the letter M. This letter M denotes ownership by the State of Maryland dur-

ing the War of 1812 and matches the mark on Henry and Deringer pistols from this period. It is probably one of 200 pistols purchased from a Mr. Irving Smith on Dec. 3, 1813, and listed on The Maryland Statement for Arms Purchases. All other pistols on the list were purchased from Henry and Deringer. Smith was probably an importer or agent and supplied pistols that he had in stock to meet the need for arms in 1813.

This type of imported pistol fulfilled the demand for a low cost pistol at prices that American gunsmiths could not profitably match. At the high end, a few gunsmiths such as James Haslett of Baltimore, R. Constable of Philadelphia, and Simeon North of Middletown, Ct., were able to meet the limited demand for fine English style pistols. Of course, the English makers also competed for this segment of the market as well as the lower cost segments.

Thus American pistols were economically constrained primarily to the middle market by both cost and customer demand. The demand for pistols was always much less than for rifles, because a rifle was a far more useful weapon for America than the pistol. Within the two constraints of cost and demand, the American gunsmith produced a distinctive American pistol by combining elements of both the Kentucky rifle and the English pistol.

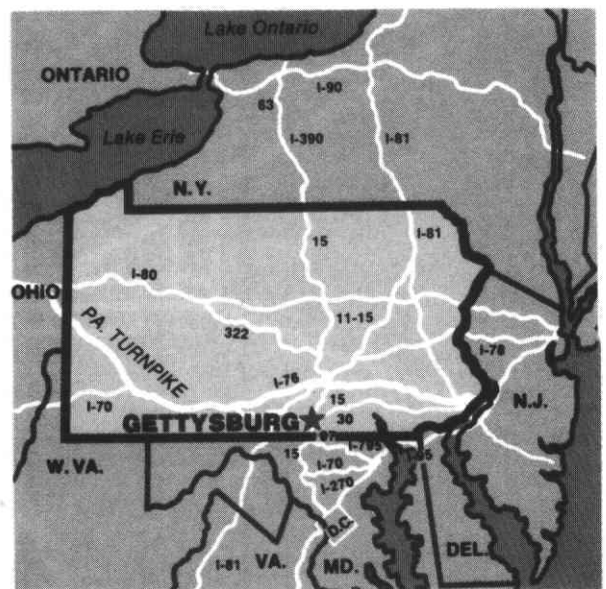
NOTES

1. Francis Jo Paig and Micheal Contory, Editors: *The American Craftsman and the European Tradition*, Catalog of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts Exhibit, 1989, p. 92.
2. For an excellent account of the craftsmen's use of London fashion as a quality reference, see William MacPherson's *Philadelphia Furniture*, 2nd printing, Highland House Publisher, Washington DC, 1977, p. 80.
3. Henry J. Kauffman, *Early American Gunsmiths 1650-1850*, The Stackpole Co., Harrisburg PA, 1952, contains many examples of the use of London as a reference of high standards for gun making.
4. J. F. Hayward, *The Art of the Gunmaker Vol II*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1963, p. 211.
5. Norman Dixon, *Georgian Pistols*, George Shumway, Publisher, York PA, 1971, p. 172.
6. Scott T. Swank, *Arts of the Pennsylvania German*, W. Norton & Co., N.Y., 1983, p. 219.
7. For a fine close up view of the Zorger pistol lock plate, see Hayward, op. cit., illustration 86A.
8. Jennifer Goldsborough, *Silver in Maryland*, Catalogue of the Maryland Historical Society exhibit, Maryland Historical Society, 1983, p. 168-169.
9. Hayward, p. 95
10. Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved*, Temple University press, Philadelphia, Pa., 1981, p. 305.
11. John A. Atkinson, *Duelling Pistols*, Cassell, London, 1964, p. 63.
12. Giles Cromwell, *The Virginia Manufactory of Arms*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1775, p. 4-6.
13. William S. Bowers, *Gunsmiths of Pen-Mar-Va 1790-1880*, Irwinton Publisher, Mercersburg Pa., 1979, p. 21.
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19. For an excellent discussion of the import trade, see DeWitt Bailey, op. cit., p. 115.

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"Pennsylvania – America Starts Here." From the pamphlet of the Gettysburg Travel Council.